



HOWARD GREENBERG GALLERY

For Immediate Release

JAMES VAN DER ZEE: STUDIO
HOWARD GREENBERG GALLERY
March 7 – April 27, 2019



James Van Der Zee, *Eve's Daughter*, c.1920
Gelatin silver print; printed c.1920, 6 1/4 x 4 1/4 inches
©Donna Mussenden Van Der Zee,
Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York

NEW YORK— James Van Der Zee, the celebrated African American photographer whose studio was at the crossroads of the Harlem Renaissance, depicted the lives of black New Yorkers for decades. Forty of his influential portraits will be on view at Howard Greenberg Gallery from March 7- April 27, 2019. Spanning the 1920s through the 1950s, ***James Van Der Zee: Studio*** marks the photographer's first exhibition in New York in over 15 years, providing a window into his legendary studio and the vast archive he created of Harlem's cultural history. Van Der Zee's inclusion in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition in 1969 brought his work to a new audience securing his reputation as one of the great photographers of the 20th century. An opening reception will be held on Thursday, March 7, from 6 – 8 p.m.

When James Van Der Zee opened his photography studio on 135th Street in 1918, a new era was beginning in Harlem, a time when jazz, poetry, art, and literature all flourished. Capturing the glamour as well as everyday life, Van Der Zee became known as the eye of the Harlem Renaissance.

Unique among portrait photographers, Van Der Zee used painted backdrops and luxurious props, creating elaborate tableaux for his subjects, and bathing them in flattering lighting. After developing his photographs, he would at times take out his paintbrushes, carefully hand coloring his images. Finding and portraying the elegance and refinement of his subjects was his mission be it Marcus Garvey, the noted civil rights activist and politician, or multiple generations celebrating a family event.

While known predominantly for his portraits, Van Der Zee also chronicled the streets around him. The exhibition will include his photographs showing Harlem storefronts, parades, and church groups, providing a glimpse of the era's quotidian elements of life. Together with his portraits, they give viewers the most complete picture available of lives lived in Harlem for over a half a century.

James Van Der Zee's legacy has inspired numerous contemporary artists among them Lorna Simpson, who referenced Van Der Zee's props in her recent photography; Dawoud Bey, who attended the 1969 Metropolitan Museum exhibition as a 16-year-old and was deeply affected; and Barry Jenkins, the director of the 2019 Oscar-nominated film *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

"Seeing Van Der Zee's photographs of ordinary African Americans marked the beginning of my own aspirations," notes Dawoud Bey, whose work will be subject of a traveling exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art next year. "Certainly my early *Harlem, USA* photographs sought to portray the Harlem residents of the 1970s with a dignity that I first encountered in his work."

About James Van Der Zee

James Van Der Zee (1886-1983) was born in Lenox, Massachusetts. At the age of 14, he received his first camera and took hundreds of photographs of his family and the town of Lenox. In 1916, he moved to Harlem just as large numbers of black migrants and immigrants were arriving there. He set up his first portrait studio in his sister's music conservatory and two years later, with his second wife, Gaynella Greenlee, established the Guarantee Photo Studio in Harlem. Quickly Van Der Zee became the most successful photographer in Harlem. Early 20th century entertainer/dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and renowned poet Countee Cullen were among his more prominent subjects.

In 1969, the art world finally took notice when Van Der Zee's work formed the centerpiece of the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Although the exhibition was controversial and its many shortcomings caused anger in the black community, it did have a powerful effect on his career. Many in turn promoted his work in exhibitions around the

nation. He and his images were also the subject of numerous books and documentaries. In the few years before his death, encouraged by his third wife, Donna Van Der Zee, whom he married in 1978 and who manages his estate, Van Der Zee came out of retirement to photograph luminaries such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Miles Davis, and Muhammad Ali. In 1993, the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. exhibited his work as a posthumous tribute.

About Howard Greenberg Gallery

Since its inception over 35 years ago, Howard Greenberg Gallery has built a vast and ever-changing collection of some of the most important photographs in the medium. The Gallery's collection acts as a living history of photography, offering genres and styles from Pictorialism to Modernism, in addition to contemporary photography and images conceived for industry, advertising, and fashion. Howard Greenberg Gallery is located at 41 East 57th Street, Suite 1406, New York. The gallery exhibits at The ADAA Art Show, The Armory Show, The Photography Show presented by AIPAD, New York, Photo London, Art Basel, Paris Photo, and Art Basel Miami Beach. For more information, contact 212-334-0010 or info@howardgreenberg.com or visit www.howardgreenberg.com.

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